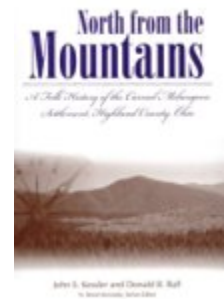


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John S. Kessler, Donald B. Ball. *North From the Mountains: A Folk History of the Carmel Melungeon Settlement, Highland County, Ohio*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001. xiii + 220 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86554-703-2; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-700-1.

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Ethnic Diversity in Appalachia and Appalachian Ohio

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Scholars of the Appalachian South have begun to explore the ethnic and racial diversity of the region as part of an attempt to go beyond the one-dimensional stereotype of the white, “one hundred percent American” hillbilly that has frequently prevailed in depictions of the area’s residents. Kessler and Ball offer an interesting contribution to this effort. The title, *North from the Mountains*, while specifically describing migration from the mountains of eastern Kentucky to the hills of southern Ohio, also refers to a migration from South to North that took place in several steps, over several generations. The group that established the settlement in the small crossroads community of Carmel, Ohio had its origins, the authors explain, in a multi-racial community that formed in the mid-Atlantic colonies between the mid-1600s and 1800. Members of the group relocated to the disputed borderlands of the Virginia and North Carolina mountains during the 1790s, where they were called “Melungeons,” and from there to Magoffin County (then part of Floyd County), Kentucky, by 1810. Migrants from Magoffin County settled in Highland County, Ohio, around 1864, forming the Carmel Melungeon settlement. The Melungeon settlement straddled the borders of Highland and Pike counties and spread south and east from Carmel, a small crossroads community not far from the current Fort Hill State Memorial. Although it never grew into a town, during the 1940s Carmel was large enough to sustain a store, schools (later absorbed during the con-

solidation process), two churches, and several cemeteries. At its peak size around 1900, Carmel had included additional stores and businesses, an attorney, and a post office (operating from 1856 until 1921). The Melungeon settlement in Carmel appears to have reached its peak size of around 150 people during the 1940s.

The questions “Who are the Melungeons?” and “Where did they come from?” have intrigued anthropologists, novelists, and regional scholars for many decades. To an even greater degree than is the case for other residents of the Southern Appalachians, the group has been the subject of stereotype and myth. The term “Melungeon” is explained as an adaptation of the French “mélange,” meaning “mixture,” and has sometimes been used as an epithet. Kessler and Ball use the Spanish “mestizo,” meaning a person of mixed racial ancestry, to characterize members of the Melungeon communities. The term “Melungeon” describes several insular, multi-ethnic, or multi-racial communities within the Appalachian region, notably those located in Hancock and Hawkins counties in Tennessee, and Lee, Scott, and Wise counties in Virginia. However, Kessler and Ball argue that this definition should be expanded to include “genetically comparable and similarly named families throughout an area covering at least twenty-nine adjacent counties variously located in northwestern North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, northeastern Tennessee, and southeastern Kentucky,” in addition to the Carmel settlement (p. 2). These mixed-race communities were often held in low regard by their neigh-

bors, creating a sense of shared identity among residents within the community that was reinforced by hostility from outside. Historically, the attitude of residents of the communities surrounding mestizo settlements was often manifested in a refusal to intermarry with the community members, a pattern that served to reinforce group identity and to preserve racial composition. Kessler and Ball also provide concise discussions of other mestizo populations within the Appalachian area that are unrelated to the Melungeon groups and delineate the points of distinction among the groups.

During the 1940s and 1950s, anthropologists described Melungeon communities as “tri-racial isolates,” a term that emphasized a mixed heritage of white, African, and Native American ancestry. The authors note that group members generally emphasized their Native American rather than their African ancestry, although both races contributed to the group’s ethnic mix. A more controversial aspect of Melungeon identity is the group’s claim of Portuguese and/or Middle Eastern ancestry. Molecular biologist Kevin Jones is currently coordinating a project to analyze genetic material from Melungeon community members in order to answer the question of ancestry. N. Brent Kennedy, who edits the series “The Melungeons,” addresses the issue of identity in the book’s foreword. Kennedy is also the author of a recent book on the Melungeons and a leader in the movement for Melungeon pride and identity.[1] In discussing the ancestry of the group, Kennedy writes, “No doubt some of us are primarily Native American; others more Turkish and/or central Asian; still others more Portuguese, or Semitic, or African. But, despite the old argument that the Melungeon claim to be of various origins is ‘proof’ against all origins, there is no conflict in such a multiplicity of claims. We were more multicultural than the average Englishman when we first arrived. And, like all Americans, we Melungeons have also become even more multicultural and multiethnic with the passage of time.” Kennedy continues, “Early America was far more ethnically and racially complex than we have been taught. Some whites were *not* northern European, some blacks were *not* sub-Saharan African, and some Indians and some mulattos were *not* Indians and mulattos....We Melungeons and, indeed, other mixed groups have irrefutable ties not only to northern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and early America, but also to the eastern Mediterranean, southern Europe, northern African, and central Asia” (pp. ix-x).

In addition to discussing mestizo communities in Appalachia, *North from the Mountains* also contributes to lit-

erature on the migration within and out of Appalachia. The Carmel Melungeon settlement was located barely within Appalachian Ohio, south and west of the town of Waverly and the city of Chillicothe. Situated among the foothills of the Appalachian plateau, the settlement eventually became “a way station operated by kinfolk between more northerly destinations and Magoffin County [Kentucky]” (p. 141). By the 1990s, the authors concluded, most evidence of the Carmel settlement had melted away. The Melungeons’ journey as part of a larger pattern of migration from the Appalachian states to new homes in the North and Midwest is not fully developed. Neither do the authors tell us much about the eventual destinations of these Appalachian migrants, other than through vague references to Ohio and Michigan.

One of the ways the authors trace the group’s persistence and decline is through an analysis of surname patterns and their occurrence and diffusion. They do note, however, that having a surname that is associated with the Melungeon group does not necessarily mean that one was a Melungeon. Gibson (also, Gipson), Collins, and Perkins were the names occurring most frequently within the group. The authors also use information drawn from grave markers in cemeteries near the Carmel community to trace the group’s growth and contraction, thus providing a new source for studying the community. This information is incomplete, however, and subject to different interpretations. Although Kessler and Ball see the absence of infant graves and an average higher age at death in the past half-century as an indication that the group had ceased to be a viable community (i.e., concluding that such evidence pointed to the out-migration of residents who were of childbearing age), this evidence could also be read as a result of improved nutrition and health care that has reduced infant mortality and perinatal death in the past half-century.

Overall, *North from the Mountains* offers an uneven treatment of its subject. The book’s title identifies it as a “folk history,” but much of the book is devoted to analyzing previous anthropological research about the topic. The discussion of the background to the Carmel settlement is a strong point, as is the placing of the story within that of the wider community of Highland County, Ohio. Here we get a sense of how the Carmel Melungeons compared with other migrants from Kentucky and see how they were regarded by some members of the local population. The previous literature about the Carmel settlement is contextualized mainly through the recollections of co-author John S. Kessler, who describes the community as it existed during the 1940s. Kessler was born in 1933 and

spent the first two decades of his life in a community near the Carmel settlement, there interacting with community members. Kessler's "folk history" occupies some thirty-three pages of the book's 145-page text (the remaining seventy-five pages of the book consist of detailed appendices and reference materials). Kessler's folk history adds a valuable dimension to the book, for he was a careful observer and reporter. Still, his account was written over four decades after the events he describes and, like all such records, has been influenced by the passage of time and by his subsequent experiences.

Readers will have difficulty evaluating some of the sources that are used. The authors make substantial use of writings by local and amateur historians, and of census data as evaluated by earlier scholars. We are told that the 1950 census provides the "most current available census figures for the spatially disperse Melungeon population in southern Appalachia" (p. 154), a puzzling comment in light of their call elsewhere for the promise of obtaining information through "a review of available census data and other records" for communities in Ohio (p. 134). The lines between literary description and anthropological analysis are sometimes unclear, especially in the fifteen pages of the book that are devoted to a discussion of the novel *Squaw Winter: A Love Story Based on the Indian Folklore of Highland County*, by local historian Violet Morgan.^[2] Both Kessler's account and the analysis of Morgan's novel, however, reinforce the message that the language and cultural patterns of the Carmel Melungeons were virtually indistinguishable from those of other migrants from Kentucky. Indeed, it would seem that the Carmel Melungeons were also more similar to the other residents of southern Ohio than different from them. Although the people who lived nearby identified community members as "Carmel Indians" or "Carmelites" and accorded them a status near the bottom of the social hierarchy, the differences between the Melungeons and their neighbors seemed to be more a function of economic status than culture or ethnicity.

The most disappointing aspect of the book is the absence of the voices of the Carmel community's mem-

bers. We are left to wonder how group members regarded themselves and how they would have described their status and their experiences. We are also left to wonder whether any of the group remained as residents in the area. Did they internalize the often negative depictions from outsiders? Did they preserve their community after migrating elsewhere? What were the positive aspects of their lives? The book seems incomplete, especially as the authors leave such questions unanswered and call for "a thorough review of locally available public documents," a more detailed examination of census data, the analysis of material culture (including grave markers), a "review of public documents," and the use of oral history collections (p. 134). Indeed, the use of oral history to supplement other materials could have added a valuable dimension to the current study by providing a voice for members of the Carmel settlement.

Despite its shortcomings, *North from the Mountains* adds to the body of work on Southern Ohio. Including within itself the transitional zone separating the foothills of Appalachia from the Midwest and bounding on the Ohio River, the traditional boundary between North and South, this area was part of a "northern" state but so near the South that it became the temporary or permanent home for subsequent waves of migrants seeking refuge and economic opportunities. The book also illustrates the ethnic and racial diversity of Appalachia and makes an important contribution to the body of work that is beginning to add racial, ethnic, and gendered dimensions to our understanding of the Appalachian past. Like the rest of the United States, Appalachia is more diverse than most people realize.

[1]. N. Brent Kennedy, with Robyn Vaughan Kennedy. *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People. An Untold Story of Ethnic Cleansing in America*, second, revised, and corrected edition (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997 (1994)).

[2]. Violet Morgan. *Squaw Winter: A Love Story Based on the Indian Folklore of Highland County* (Greenfield Printing & Publishing Company, 1955).

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